



10 MEDICINAL PLANTS OF THE SOUTHEAST

BY MATTHEW HUNTER



10 Medicinal Plants of the Southeast

A Free Mini-Guide

by Matthew Hunter

Welcome to the World of Medicinal Plants!

Hello! My name is Matthew Hunter. In this short ebook I'm going to introduce you to the world of foraging and wildcrafting with 10 common plants you can use for medicine!

Starting out with edible or medicinal plants can feel *overwhelming* at first, but I'm here to tell you that it doesn't have to be! The best way to learn plants is to limit yourself to only a handful of plants and simply learn them *one at a time*.

In this short paper I've chosen common, easy to identify plants with a long history of medicinal uses that you can use to treat a variety of issues like fatigue, anxiety, stress, overwhelm, trouble sleeping, coughs, colds, flu, and more!

As you start to use each plant, you'll get to know each one better and better, until eventually you won't need to follow the directions in some book, you'll know exactly what to do all on your own!

Don't feel like you need to learn tons of different plants to get good at herbal medicine. You don't need to be an expert at herbalism to know that mullein tea soothes a cough. You just need to drink a cup! You can start finding relief to common ailments *this week* with only a handful of well chosen plants. If you start with these plants, who knows how far you'll go. But if you never start, you won't go anywhere! So read this book, pick some plants, and brew some tea my friends. And enjoy the journey!

Medicinal Plant Preparations

To get started with medicinal plants you don't need a fancy setup. For many plants all you'll need to do is make a simple *decoction*. A decoction is simply a hot tea where you boil the plant for 10-20 minutes and drink a cup. Another term you'll need to know is *infusion*. An infusion is a cold water tea where you let the plants sit in cold water for a while, strain it, and drink.

Some people really like precise directions when they're making an infusion or decoction, but I've always preferred just to boil some up and judge the strength of it by taste. As you learn each plant you'll begin to get a feel for how much to use, but until then I've added recommended amounts in the Preparation and Dosage sections to get you started.

I suppose I should quickly clarify that although I tend to experiment with dosage for most plants, for *some* plants you'll want to be *very careful* not to over dose and use too much, because some medicinal plants are toxic and are only taken in small doses. However, in this reference I've only included plants that are generally considered safe.

What Are Tinctures?

A tincture is a medicinal plant *extract* made by soaking a plant in liquor, usually vodka or Everclear. When using fresh plants, a higher alcohol content is often used (190 proof/95% aka Everclear). To make a fresh plant tincture, I pack a jar completely full of the fresh herb, then fill in the gaps with Everclear. I then throw the mixture in a blender, blend, and put it back in the jar. Lastly, I top it off with more Everclear and let it sit for 2 weeks, shaking every day or so.

If the herb is dried, a lower alcohol content can be used (80 proof/40% vodka will usually do). Grind the dried herb into a powder and fill up the jar about a quarter of the way full. Fill the rest of the jar up with alcohol, then let it sit for 2-3 weeks and shake it every day.

One of the major benefits of tinctures is that they're more convenient to use than teas. Many herbs take days of constant use to produce the desired effects, and in all honesty, most people lack the discipline to constantly be brewing decoctions day in and day out, drinking 3 cups of tea per day. Many people find it easier to tincture the plant and take 3 dropperfuls per day than drink 3 cups of tea per day.



From left to right: A sweet bay magnolia tincture brewing, a finished crossvine tincture awaiting bottling, and an experimental perilla tincture.

Boneset

(*Eupatorium perfoliatum*)

A potent antiviral herb for flus and colds. Boneset stimulates the immune system and helps soothe a painful cough.



Identification

Boneset is a hairy plant that grows upright to about waist to chest high at maturity. The leaves are oppositely arranged and *connected at the bases*, making it look like the stem is poking right through(see pictures).

Boneset produces clusters of white flowers in the summertime.

Medicinal Uses

Boneset is an excellent plant to use right at the onset of a cold or flu. It's considered a strong antiviral, and it has a long history of use for this purpose. It's also a powerful immune system stimulant, helping your body knock out a cold quickly.

Boneset is a great pain reliever, equal to aspirin in strength. It's particularly helpful in treating muscle aches that some people get when they're sick with the flu. It also helps relieve the pain of a cough, and is antispasmodic, meaning that it relaxes the muscles and helps diminish the cough reflex(which is helpful if you have a painful cough).

Lastly, boneset is a diaphoretic, which means it induces sweating and can help you break a mild fever. If you feel like you're getting a flu and associated fever, drink a hot cup before you go to bed and cover up with a few blankets.



Preparation & Dosage

To make boneset into a tea, use about 1 teaspoon per cup of water (or about 4-6 teaspoons per quart). Pour boiling water over the dried herb, let it steep, and drink about half a cup at a time, 2-3 times a day. You can also make it into a tincture. Boneset is *very* bitter, but it works like a charm.

Contraindications

Don't use if pregnant or nursing. May not be good for young children. Boneset

is not for long term use (don't use it for more than 3 weeks at a time). Can cause nausea, vomiting, or be a powerful laxative for some people, especially with higher doses.

Mullein

(*Verbascum thapsus*)

A powerful medicinal plant for lung and upper respiratory congestion. Mullein will soothe a stuffy nose in minutes.



Identification

Mullein typically has a two year life cycle. Year one is its rosette stage, where the leaves grow directly out of the ground. During this stage it's identified by its fuzzy, greenish-yellow leaves, with the younger leaves forming a cluster at the center of the plant (see picture).

In the second year the plant sends up a tall stalk up to 6ft. tall with yellow flowers, which then dries, turns brown, and can be used to locate the plants from a distance.

Medicinal Uses

Mullein is extremely effective at taking away the pain of a congested nose and sore throat. It's soothing to the mucous membranes of the lungs and upper respiratory system, and I use it almost every time I'm sick with a cold. Mullein also opens the lungs, making it useful for people suffering from asthma or bronchitis. Mullein can also be used to alleviate itchiness and congestion from seasonal allergies. It is very effective for this purpose.

Mullein flowers are a well-known remedy for ear infections. A classic formula is to infuse garlic and mullein flowers into oil and drip a few drops into your ear. The garlic helps knock out the infection itself, while the mullein flowers help soothe the ear and reduce inflammation.

Lastly, mullein root is used as an anti-inflammatory for the urinary tract. It can be used for people who have trouble controlling urination (bed-wetting), bladder infection and irritation, and urinary tract infections (Coffman 2014).



Preparation & Dosage

I've never measured exact amounts when making mullein leaf tea. Just boil a few leaves, strain, and drink. You'll quickly learn the proper dosage by taste, and after drinking only a small cup you'll be amazed at its effectiveness. It's important to strain

the leaves with a cheesecloth to filter out the hairs that cover the leaves, which can be slightly irritating to the throat. Mullein root is more harsh than the leaves, so a little bit goes a long way. Boil a teaspoon of the dried root in a couple cups of water, and if it's too strong simply dilute it to taste (but expect it to be bitter). I've never drank the root tea, but I have a glass jar full of the roots that I chew from time to time to alleviate a sore throat and stuffy nose. I harvested them years ago to experiment, but didn't care for their bitter flavor, so I only use them when I run out of leaves.

To make an oil for ear infections: fill up a quarter pint jar full of mullein flowers, add 4 cloves of fresh chopped garlic, then fill the jar with extra virgin olive oil. Let it sit in a cool dark place for 2-4 weeks, then strain the debris through a cheesecloth. Use a few drops in your ear as needed, but do not use it if your eardrum is punctured.

Contraindications

Mullein is generally considered a very safe herb. However, according to expert herbalist Darryl Patton, using the outer leaves of a rosette before bedtime causes nightmares in some people. Instead of using the more mature leaves, use the small inner leaves of the rosette that are clustered together in the middle (see picture). Other than nightmares, there are no dangers of using the mature leaves.

Plantain

(*Plantago spp.*)

The ultimate remedy for itchy insect bites and poison ivy.



Identification

Plantain is a common weed that grows throughout all 50 states. In the southeast you can find it growing in moist, shady lawns. There are numerous species in our region, and they can all be used the same way. Some have hairless leaves, while some are hairy. Some have more round leaves, while some are longer and narrower.

One characteristic that all plantains have in common is that they have multiple primary veins that all run alongside each other. When you break the leaf at the base, you'll notice that the inner strands of the veins are tough and can be seen hanging out of the broken section. These are two of the primary identifying features for this group of plants.

Plantains are low growing plants. All of the leaves grow directly out of the ground, and they don't send up a leafstalk.

However, they do send up a short flowerstalk that has white flowers in the spring.

Medicinal Uses

One of plantain's most well known uses is for bites, stings, and itch relief. It's extremely effective for treating itchy mosquito or tick bites. Just chew some up and rub it on your bites, and in about 15 minutes the itchiness and inflammation will completely disappear. It's also reported to be effective at treating the pain of a bee or wasp sting, something I've yet to try. Plantain is used for all kinds of skin injuries including minor cuts and scrapes, bruises, and burns.

Another great use for plantain is to treat poison ivy. If you rub the juice on your skin you can get quick relief, and it's also great to rub on you or your child's skin as a *preventative*. If someone gets into poison ivy, plantain can help prevent a rash from forming.

Plantain is also used internally for many different purposes. It's an anti-inflammatory that's both astringent and demulcent(soothing). It's great for a dry, painful cough or a sore throat, and it's also used to soothe both GI and urinary tract issues. Common ailments it can be used to treat include cystitis, stomach ulcers, acid reflux, and colitis. Pretty much any internal inflammation of the digestive and urinary systems will be reduced by plantain.

Besides being medicinal, plantain is also edible. The young leaves are edible raw, but once they mature the veins become fibrous and stringy.



Preparation & Dosage

Plantain is a very safe plant, so feel free to experiment away. For topical use you can simply make a spit poultice by chewing the plant and rubbing it on insect bites or a poison ivy rash. It can also be made into a salve with oil and beeswax to preserve it for later use.

For internal use plantain can be made into either a tea

or tincture. To make a tea, boil a small handful of fresh leaves in a cup of water, or pour boiling water over about 2 teaspoons of the dried plant and let it steep for 10 minutes.



Perilla (also called beefsteak plant)

(*Perilla frutescens*)

Perilla is a great plant for all-around health. It's a broad anti-inflammatory, and it has antioxidants that are good for the brain and heart. It's been used for thousands of years in Traditional Chinese Medicine to soothe the GI tract and treat colds.



Identification

Perilla is a mint family plant that can be found growing widespread throughout the Southeast in moist areas including ditches, backyard gardens, and near lake shores. It has at least two color variations. One is green with purplish undersides, and the other is completely deep reddish-purple. The red variety can sometimes be found planted in landscaping as an ornamental. Both color variations are the same plant and used the same way.

Like all mint family plants, perilla has generally 4-sided stems. It has a minty smell that somewhat resembles licorice.



Medicinal Uses

Perilla is a plant with many uses. It's originally from Asia, where it is commonly eaten as a vegetable in seafood dishes, and it also has a rich history of use as a medicine.

Let's begin by talking about perilla's use for the gastrointestinal tract. Due to its anti-inflammatory action on the digestive system, perilla is used for calming the stomach, reducing nausea, treating heartburn, and for other GI related issues.

It's especially useful for treating nausea and vomiting during early pregnancy. In fact, it's even thought to increase fertility and help prevent miscarriage. Perilla has been shown to increase leukemia inhibitory factor (LIF), a cytokine that plays an important role in embryo implantation and early embryo development. One study summarized perilla this way: "Given the importance of endometrial receptivity in successful pregnancy, *Perilla frutescens* can be a novel and effective candidate for improving pregnancy rate." (Kim EY et al. 2016)

Another use of perilla is to help open the lungs and treat colds. It's been used to treat asthma, bronchitis, allergies, and influenza. Two recent studies found that it actually

inhibits SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The results of one study are as follows: “Aqueous [water] infusions prepared by boiling leaves of the Lamiaceae perilla and sage elicit potent and sustained antiviral activity against SARS-CoV-2 when applied after infection as well as prior to infection of cells.” (Le-Trilling VTK et al. 2022)

Although clinical trials haven’t been done on *actual people* that show the effectiveness of perilla for treating COVID, the two studies that have been done seem promising, especially given that perilla has traditionally been used to treat colds and flus.

Preparation & Dosage

Perilla is another safe plant that is also used as a food. You can drink it at whatever strength you prefer, either as a pleasant tea, or stronger if you desire a therapeutic dose. If you’re using it medicinally, drink 3 cups per day.

Sweet Bay Magnolia

(*Magnolia virginiana*)

Magnolia is a great anti-inflammatory for arthritis pain. It's also an excellent mood elevator and stress-reliever for people who are burnt out, anxious, or overwhelmed.



Identification

Sweet bay magnolia is a multi-trunked tree with gray bark and leathery, bay-like leaves that have white undersides. It has white flowers and green “seed cones” that produce bright red seeds. Sweet bay magnolia can be either deciduous, evergreen, or somewhere in between depending on where it’s growing and how harsh the winter is that year. Other deciduous species of magnolias can be used similarly to sweet bay.

Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) has large evergreen leaves with copper undersides. It’s the most common species of magnolia planted in landscaping, but it’s also considered the weakest species of magnolia to use as a medicine.

Medicinal Uses

If you do a study of how magnolias were used historically on the North American continent, you’ll find that there were about 4 or 5 major uses for this family of trees. Here they are:

1. As an antimalarial and fever reducer. Although malaria is no longer a problem in the United States today, one of the widespread uses of magnolia was to treat this virulent disease, probably due to its fever-reducing qualities.
2. As a remedy for rheumatism. Magnolia is a great traditional



remedy for arthritis and joint pain. It’s an anti-inflammatory, and is still used to treat arthritis pain to this day. It works great with prickly ash for this purpose.

3. Stomach cramps, indigestion, and GI related issues including diarrhea and dysentery. Magnolia reduces muscle spasms in the GI tract(it’s an antispasmodic).

4. Colds and coughs. Magnolia is also used in Traditional Chinese Medicine to treat colds, coughs, and bronchitis, and a 2011 study done on mice infected with influenza virus A showed that magnolia does indeed have the potential to help treat the flu (ofcourse, we already knew that, but this study just backed up what was already known for centuries).

5. Lasty, magnolia was used as a vermifuge against intestinal worms, although it’s not clear if this use was as widespread as the four above categories.



Now that we've looked at historical North American uses, let's talk about some of the primary uses in Traditional Chinese Medicine. The Chinese are way ahead of the West when it comes to herbal medicine, and almost all of the numerous studies done on magnolia have been done on the Chinese species, *Magnolia officinalis*. Not to worry though, our North American species can be used the same way, and they have the same two active constituents, magnolol and honokiol.

Magnolia bark is a very important traditional medicine in China and Japan, where it is used to treat depression and anxiety. It's been used for this purpose for a *very* long time, and doctors in America also recommend it for this use.

Magnolia is neuroprotective, which means it protects the brain and improves brain function. It's an anti-inflammatory for the brain, and helps prevent the progress of dementia and Alzheimer's.

Lastly, magnolia is a great stress reliever and mood improver. Using it can help with anxiety and overwhelm, and give you a better outlook on your day if you've been feeling burnt out and stressed.

Preparation & Dosage

To make a tea of magnolia bark, boil about two teaspoons of chopped bark in a quart of water for 15-20 minutes. Feel free to modify the exact amount based on taste. It should be bitter but not *too* strong. Drink 1 cup 3 times per day for arthritis pain.

For a tincture, cut up either the bark or immature seed cones and put them into a jar and completely cover them with 195 proof pure grain alcohol(Everclear). Shake the jar daily for two weeks, then strain. Take 1 dropper (30 drops) 3 times per day.



Self Heal

(*Prunella vulgaris*)

Self heal is a well-known tonic for general health. It also really shines as an antiviral for chickenpox, shingles, and herpes simplex virus.

Identification

Self heal is a low growing plant in the mint family. It can be found growing in moist trail openings in the forest, or as a lawn weed in moist yards. Self heal lacks a minty smell(it's non-aromatic), but like other mints it has a distinct 4-sided stem.

The leaves of self heal are hairy, and they can be toothed or toothless. The structure that the flowers come out of is distinct(see pictures). It has purple flowers that resemble other mint family flowers.

Medicinal Uses

Self heal has a wide array of medicinal uses, hence its two most common names: self heal and heal all. It's a tonic herb that can benefit the whole body through a variety of different ways. It's full of antioxidants, helps lower high blood pressure, is great for the heart, and helps with diabetes(it's hypoglycemic). It's an all around great plant to drink as a tea to help keep you healthy and prevent disease. In fact, I'm drinking a cup as I write this.

Numerous studies have been done on this plant that demonstrate its effectiveness for a variety of conditions, and it has a long and extensive history of use, but I just want to focus on a few different ailments it treats to give you somewhere to start.

Like I mentioned, self heal is a great tonic that you can simply drink to get healthier. Another great use for it is for fighting colds and flu. Self heal stimulates the immune system and helps knock out a cold(or prevents them from being as bad).

Self heal is also an antiviral. It's a well known remedy for treating herpes outbreaks, chicken pox, and shingles. It fights the viruses, helps reduce inflamed tissues, and reduces the occurrence of outbreaks. Combined with



lemon balm(*Mellisa officinalis*) it will work wonders against these ailments.

I better stop here before this short paper becomes a whole book about self heal. There's much more to say, so make sure to keep researching the amazing healing benefits of this plant. For now, keep some on hand for next time you have a cold, or just to drink as a tonic. And if by some chance someone you know gets a shingles outbreak, remember: Self heal can help.

Preparation & Dosage

Boil 2 or 3 tablespoons of the ground leaves and flower spikes for 5 minutes in a quart of water. Drink 1 cup 3 times per day for chickenpox, shingles, or herpes outbreaks. Drink 1-2 cups per day as a general health tonic.



Crossvine

(*Bignonia capreolata*)

Crossvine helps give energy back to people who suffer from chronic fatigue.



Identification

Crossvine is an evergreen vine with pairs of opposite leaves. Leafy bracts are present at the junction where the leaves come out of the main stem(see picture below).

Crossvine has red or orange tubular flowers with yellow petals that come out in April.

Make sure not to confuse crossvine with Carolina jessamine(*Gelsemium sempervirens*). Jessamine has opposite leaves and yellow flowers that look similar to crossvine.

However, *crossvine has pairs of opposite leaves*. Jessamine is toxic and potentially deadly, and it can be growing right alongside crossvine.

Another plant with similar flowers is trumpet creeper(*Campsis radicans*). Trumpet creeper has orange flowers that can look similar to crossvine flowers, but the leaves are totally different.



Medicinal Uses

The use of crossvine was popularized by the famous Appalachian herbalist Tommie Bass. It's a great plant for people who are fatigued, overworked, and need an extra boost of energy. It's also a mood elevator that gives you mental energy and a better outlook if you've struggled with chronic fatigue and general tiredness. After taking it for about 3 days its effects will become apparent, and you'll start feeling more energized and ready to tackle the day.

Preparation & Dosage

Boil 1 packed cup of leaves to a pint of water for 10 minutes. Drink ½ or 1 cup 2 times per day (Patton).

To make a tincture, fill a jar full of fresh leaves, then cover the leaves with 195 pure grain alcohol (Everclear). Let it sit for two weeks, shaking regularly. Strain and take one dropper (30 drops) two times per day.

Sweet Gum

(*Liquidambar styraciflua*)

A popular and effective traditional remedy for the cold and flu.

Identification

Sweet gum is a tree most of us know. It has maple-like leaves and spiky balls that litter the ground below.



Medicinal Uses

The primary active compound in sweet gum that gives it its medicinal effect is called shikimic acid. Shikimic acid is the precursor to the over-the-counter drug Tamiflu, and is used similarly to Tamiflu as a respiratory antiviral for colds and flu. Sweet gum is

also a stimulating expectorant, which means it can help loosen phlegm that feels stuck in your lungs so you can cough it out.

Preparation & Dosage

All parts of the sweet gum tree can be used for medicine, but as an antiviral cold/flu remedy, the seeds and immature green balls are used the most. To gather the seeds, harvest the green balls in the fall when they fall to the ground and put them into a bag or on a tray, then wait for them to open and release the seeds. Make sure the seeds are dry, then grind them and tincture with a 1:4 ratio using 80 proof vodka. Dose about 30-60 drops 5 times a day when fighting the flu.

To use the immature green balls, put them in a cloth bag or pillow case and smash them with a rock or hammer. Because they're fresh and have more moisture, you'll need a higher alcohol content to make a tincture. Make a 1:2 tincture using 195 proof pure grain alcohol(Everclear), and dose the same as recommended above.

If the seeds and immature green balls aren't available, you can also use the leaves and bark (in that order).

Goldenrod

(*Solidago spp.*)

Goldenrod dries a runny nose, and is an anti-inflammatory and antiseptic for the urinary tract.

Identification

Goldenrod is a vertical-growing herb with clusters of bright yellow flowers. Tall stalks bear resinous-smelling leaves with three veins.



Medicinal Uses

The leaves and flowers of goldenrod are a powerful remedy for drying up a runny nose and alleviating allergy symptoms like sneezing, watery eyes, and respiratory congestion.

It's also an anti-inflammatory and antiseptic to the urinary tract, and is used in herbal formulas to treat urinary tract infections, bladder infections, and to help prevent kidney stones.

Preparation & Dosage

Boil 1 ounce of the leaves or flowers in 1 pint of water for 10 minutes. Take 1-2 teaspoons 3 times per day (Apelian).



Passionflower (also called passionfruit or maypop)

(*Passiflora incarnata* and *P. lutea*)

A relaxing plant for sleep, anxiety, and stress.



Leaves and flowers of maypop, *Passiflora incarnata*.

Identification

There are two species of passionflower in our region. The species most commonly used is *Passiflora incarnata*, also called maypop or passionfruit. Passionflower is a vine with 3-lobed leaves and distinct purple flowers. The leaves look similar to giant ragweed leaves, but there aren't any other vines I've ever seen with such distinct 3-lobed leaves, so once you see the flowers, you definitely know you've found the right plant.

You may be surprised to learn that the U.S. has its own species of passionfruit (a group of plants that is mostly tropical). *Passiflora incarnata* produces green, egg shaped fruit in the fall that are absolutely delicious! The fruit isn't the topic of this chapter, but I will mention that you have to wait for them to turn yellow-green and wrinkly before

they're ready. Don't make the mistake of harvesting them too early, or they won't be any good.

The second species of passionflower in our region is called yellow passionflower or *Passiflora lutea*. The leaves of yellow passionflower are also 3-lobed, but the lobes are rounded, whereas purple passionflower leaves have pointed lobes.

The flowers of yellow passionflower are much smaller and not nearly as showy or noticeable. The fruit are purple and about the size of a marble. They don't taste good like *Passiflora incarnata*.

Medicinal Uses

Passionflower leaves and flowers are commonly used in boxed teas for people who need help sleeping or relaxing. It's also great for stress and anxiety in smaller doses during the day. When used as a sleep medicine, it's often mixed with valerian and other relaxing herbs in a formula.

Preparation & Dosage

Passionflower can be tinctured by filling up a jar half way full with the dried leaves and flowers, then covering it with 80 proof vodka. Strain after 2 weeks and take 30-60 drops before bedtime, or smaller doses throughout the day for anxiety and relaxation. The plant can also be made into a tea

Contraindications

Do not use if pregnant.



Dwarf or yellow passionflower(*P. lutea*).

References and Further Reading

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